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ABSTRACT

This article addresses major philosophical orientations and shows how they have practical import for practitioners of adult education. The philosophical approaches presented are conceptual (linguistic) analysis, phenomenology, hermeneutics, critical theory, and existentialism. References are made to selected works by writers in adult education who adopt one of these orientations. The article proposes that any one of these philosophical approaches obliges the adult educator to question theories implying that the deployment of the right techniques or prescriptive formulations for curriculum and for needs assessments, and so on, somehow guarantees that adult learners will become more literate or more competent at an occupation. The adult educator's challenging role in helping to enhance some dimension of human competence in today's society, according to the article, calls for the kind of critical thought and analytical orientations associated with the philosophical approaches identified in this essay. (KC)

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PHILOSOPHY AND THE ROLE OF

THE ADULT EDUCATOR

Philosophy as a Practical Concern

As adult educators most of us are inclined to philosophize, from time to time, about the practice of our vocation. In fact, this tendency can be viewed as a positive indicator of the high level of commitment to our chosen field of work. However, very few of us (including professors of adult education) are able, or would want, to do philosophy in the manner of professional philosophers. The reason for this is straightforward enough. We have opted for an exacting vocation, somewhat missionary in nature, that permits neither the time nor the distancing perspective for us to engage, on a continuing basis, with the rigorous standards required of a seriously committed professional philosopher. Having laid down this qualification, it is important for us to recognize that a philosophical orientation is integral to the practice of adult education, and that this entails more than imprecise speculation and superficial theorizing. Philosophizing in this vein is a testimony to our enthusiasm, but it does little to aid in the clarification and disclosure of the contextual meanings of problems, trends, and complex issues we have to confront in our day-to-day practice as adult educators.

The purpose of this article is to explore, briefly, philosophical approaches that have had some influence on recent academic literature of the field, and to indicate what practical import they have for the role of adult educator. This reference to the practical import of philosophy does

not put us in the same camp as those professional educators who are forever speculating about "putting theory into practice." A more useful orientation is for us to think, rather, in terms of serious engagement with theoretical discourse and philosophical writings, and then putting ourselves, having perhaps benefitted from the experience, into practice. In this sense, philosophy can be envisioned as the vehicle for sustained critical thought about the important dimensions of adult education, providing a means for clarification and an enhanced understanding about our vocation as the pre-requisites for more informed practice.

Greater relevance can be imparted to the philosophical approaches described in this article if the reader cares to incorporate examples from his or her own experience as an adult educator in addition to those touched upon by the writer. The scholarly studies cited in this study are carefully chosen because, for the most part, they deal directly with important adult education concerns from one or other of the philosophical approaches described and merit the critical attention of adult education practitioners.

Conceptual (Linguistic) Analysis

During recent decades this has been the predominant mode, more particularly from a professional academic standpoint, of doing philosophy in the English speaking (Anglo Saxon) world. Linguistic analysis, that stems largely from the philosophy of G.E. Moore and Ludwig Wittgenstein, adopts the standpoint that the over-riding task of modern philosophy is the analysis of language use, or the analysis of concepts. The major

thrust, then, is for conceptual clarification through careful analysis of the way we use the language. In the process, ambiguities, obscure associations, and hidden, or taken-for-granted, assumptions are brought to the surface. The aim is to overcome the confusion that so often accompanies ordinary language use, and to identify those significant elements of a concept that are amenable to being readily understood in any linguistic context by those who are sufficiently competent. This reflects a concern with constituting and retaining the universal validity of linguistic terms.

Without wanting to make linguistic analysts of us all, what has all of this to do with the role of the adult educator? Well, for a start it suggests that we should be more careful and specific about how we use terms that many of us have come to think of a generic to adult education. Terms such as "lifelong learning," "self-directed learner," "andragogy," for example, are now bandied about among adult educators to a degree that they are now little more than slogans for many of us. Slogans, of course, are useful when recognized as such, and when they are evoked in a relevant context. However, the concepts referred to here could do with the kind of analysis, whether at a formal or an informal level, described in this section. As a basis for replacing the rhetoric with more precise analytical discourse, it would pay dividends to familiarize ourselves with some of the informative literature (largely non-philosophical and not overly laden with theoretical interpretations) on leading concepts of adult education that have appeared in more recent issues of the Journal on research and theory, Adult Education Quarterly, and proceedings of the Adult Education Research Conference (AERC). In the meantime, one

suspects that all kinds of what, on further analysis, would turn out to be very prescriptive curriculum designs, are being advanced under the rubic of "self-directed learning." It would be worthwhile for adult educators to give more thought, in line with the philosophical orientation of this section, to frequently used terms like "skills," "life-skills," "coping skills," "competencies," etc. How appropriate is their use as descriptors of adult education curriculum? What are the underlying assumptions entailed in their deployment that need to be clarified? The concept of "lifelong learning" has become so amorphous (though instantly recognizable as a slogan) that we can use it to loosely justify all manner of program developments, policy proposals, and grant applications. For the time being, the notion of "lifelong learning" might be immediately useful and have cash value, to legitimize many of our adult education endeavors, but without more precise attention to its meaning and substance, we might as well abandon it as a major concept supporting adult education as a vocation.

Many practitioners who are involved in program planning acknowledge that needs' assessment has become something of a "sacred cow" in adult and continuing education. This seems to originate from a scepticism about the extent to which the process has been reified as a technique rather than from doubts about the importance of needs' assessment as an integral dimension of planning adult education programs. In any event, it is reasonable to regard needs' assessment as being more problematic than is often portrayed in formulaic explainations of the concept. Adult educator and philosopher, Maurice Monette (1977, 1984) does treat the concept as problematic in a first rate article, written

from the philosophical orientation addressed in this section, entitled "The Concept of Educational Need: An Analysis of Selected Literature." It is a readable entree to the way adult educators should be thinking about well used concepts in the field of practice.

In addition to Maurice Monette's article, examples of a conceptual analytic approach to examining topics of relevance to the role of the adult educator can be derived from two works by British adult educators, Philosophical Concepts and Values in Adult Education (Lawson, 1979) and Values, Education and the Adult (Paterson, 1979).

Phenomenology

Even more than conceptual (linguistic) analysis, phenomenology can be viewed as a means to a critical philosophy. From the outset, a phenomenological perspective requires that we endeavor to put aside taken-for-granted assumptions and pre-suppositions while investigating the object(s) or event(s) of our current projects. (It is important to note here that belief in the reality of things, events, values is not to be denied but, rather, "put into brackets," temporarily suspended, while the object (event, etc.) of our immediate experiencing is explored). Clarification is then sought through careful description rather than explaination. Although "pure" phenomenology, that follows closely the original programmatic works of Edmund Husserl, holds out the possibility of deriving essential meanings (unlike the existentialism of Jean Paul Sartre and the existential phenomenology of Martin Heidegger and Maurice Merleau-Ponty), the approach is concerned more with establishing meaning

in a context than in establishing universalizable propositions. Its origins are in the continental European philosophical tradition and it is only in recent years that some scholars (not necessarily professional philosophers) have begun to refer us to significant connections between conceptual (linguistic) analysis that has held sway in the English speaking world and phenomenology.

So what has phenomenology to offer to most adult educators who are not inclined towards a pre-occupation with the intricacies of this way of doing philosophy? First of all, it has provided us with logically justifiable grounds for exploring "the things themselves" without necessary recourse to taken-for-granted assumptions and widely acclaimed theoretical frameworks. For example, from this orientation one could systematically examine facets of the ageing process in the context of adult learning through descriptions of actual lived experience while leaving out of account, at least on a temporary basis, the normative expressions and structure, concepts, and theoretical models (life-stages, etc.) typically associated with adult development. This leads to a better understanding of the phenomenon itself and, subsequently, of those taken-for-granted assumptions that get in the way of our ability to grasp the deeper meaning of the activities, personal encounters, and artifacts of everyday living which is the context of adult learning and development.

The only pre-supposition of this, otherwise "pre-suppositionless philosophy" is that the individual (conscious self) plays the significant part in shaping his or her own experiencing of the everyday world -- of events, objects, personal encounters, etc. A phenomenological perspective acknowledges the paramount significance of subjective experience.

Solipsism is avoided since our own subjective experiences continuously encounter, modify and are modified by, the subjectivity of others as well as the contingencies of the natural world. A phenomenological perspective, then, is only a prescription for adult educators in the sense that it enjoins us to look, first and foremost, to our own experiencing, and that of our adult clients, as the basis for guiding and envisioning learning projects (i.e. projects of action). It gives credence to the notion of learning how to learn.

In an article entitled "Phenomenological Perspectives: Some Implications for Adult Education," Michael Collins (1984) draws connections between leading phenomenological concepts and those we frequently cite as integral to the adult education endeavor. Two phenomenological investigations undertaken by Sherman Stanage (1983,1986), "A Phenomenology of the Will to Learn: An Investigation Toward Research into Essential Structures in Adult Education" and "Learning How to Learn: A Phenomenological Analysis of Adult 'Eductive' Learning" clearly demonstrate the relevance of this philosophical orientation for adult education. In his doctoral dissertation, Relevance of Futures in Adult Education: A Phenomenological Investigation of Images of the Future, Paul Ilsley (1982) presents us with a first rate example of how a phenomenological perspective can be brought to bear on an issue of prime concern for adult educators. While these publications require attentive reading, they do not pre-suppose that the reader has a background in academic philosophy.

The exploratory nature of phenomenology is paradigmatic of the adult learning process. As a critical philosophy, it presents us with

alternative perspective those the psychologistic (reductionist) and prescriptive, standardized formulations that are very pervasive within formal adult education.

Hermeneutics

Hermeneutics is concerned with the interpretation of written texts. Approaches to the hermeneutical (interpretative) problem vary considerably (for example, according to whether one opts for a conceptual (linguistic), rule following approach, or a phenomenological tack), but its import for adult educators is clear enough. We ought not accept the written texts of the field (policy documents, standardized curriculum modules, text books, needs' assessment reports and evaluation reports, students' writings, etc.) in a taken-for-granted sort of way. They are always problematic and, having left the private domains of the authors, are open to (re) interpretation. This does not mean that interpretations and re-interpreations will go against the grain of what the writer(s) has set out to do. The purpose is to flesh out the meaning and point to implications unstated or under-stated.

Of course, it is not feasible for us to treat all written documents that come our way as prime cases for hermeneutical investigations. However, who can deny that, as busy adult educators, we have a propensity for accepting new policy documents, curriculum materials, formal evaluations, etc. without subjecting them to interpretative effort? At best, we tend to examine such documents according to the ground rules, and within the parameters, set out by the

originators of the documents.

An overview of the scope and kinds of investigative approaches of hermeneutics has been published in a recent issue of the Adult Education Research Proceedings (Chene, Collins, Theil, 1985), which also includes a very informative research paper by Adele Chene (1985) entitled "Hermeneutics and the Educational Narrative."

Critical Theory

During the past few years, a growing number of writers in adult education have recognized the connections between their thinking and critical theory. Critical theory is associated with the work of the Frankfurt School, established during the 1920's, to further the work of several left-wing German intellectuals who, by and large, had become disenchanted with the directions Marxist political and social theorizing was taking to accommodate Moscow's version of state communism. They were, in a sense, early "neo-Marxists." At significant stages of their careers both Erich Fromm and Herbert Marcuse were connected with the Frankfurt School.

At the present time, the most influential member (certainly from an international perspective) of the Frankfurt School is Jurgen Habermas. Adult educators Jack Mezirow (1981, 1984) and Michael Collins (1985) have written articles that point to the importance of Habermas' thought for the practice of adult education. These articles would be an appropriate introduction to recent developments in critical theory since the brilliance of Habermas's theorizing is obscured by a convoluted style of

writing that does not improve in translation.

The hermeneutics of Jurgen Habermas incorporates both phenomenological and conceptual (linguistic) analysis as he re-examines the grand theories of thinkers such as Max Weber, Karl Marx, and Sigmund Freud. Habermas' interpretative efforts, hermeneutics, becomes critical theory because of his working assumption that there are coercive (oppressive) forces and structures at play in our everyday world, many of which are not even recognized by most of us. These coercive structures get in the way of any possibility of implementing communal projects of action from a basis that is, at one and the same time, democratically and rationally constituted. At the core of Habermas' work is his notion of communicative action (Collins, 1985) from which we can derive theoretical underpinnings for the kind of participatory democratic processes espoused by Eduard Lindeman (1926, 1961) in The Meaning of Adult Education.

Although some unsympathetic commentators tend to characterize Habermas's work as "the hermeneutics of suspicion," a critical theory perspective is important to adult educators because it enjoins us to eschew a naive taken-for-granted attitude to the everyday events of the adult life-world and identify coercive forces, especially where these are legitimized, that foreclose on efforts to facilitate "self-directed learning" and "learning how to learn" that many adult educators hold dear.

Conclusion

In this article we have inevitably fallen short of anything like a fully comprehensive account of what major philosophical approaches can

offer to the practice of adult education. Although it is related to the phenomenological movement, we have not, for instance, touched upon the significance that existentialism, with its emphasis on the nature of being, holds out for the practice of adult education. However, as noted at the outset, the purpose of the essay is not to urge already heavily committed adult educators to change their vocational stripe, and to become proficient in the demanding disciplines of conceptual (linguistic) analysis, phenomenology, philosophical hermeneutics, existentialism, or critical theory. Rather, it is a plea that we take note of the rationally supportable strategies for enquiry, and perspectives that can be derived from them, in taking a thoughtful and analytical stance towards our everyday practice in adult education.

Any one of these philosophical approaches brought to bear on the role of the adult educator obliges us to question developments which convey the impression that the deployment of the right techniques, or prescriptive formulations for curriculum and for needs' assessments, etc., somehow guarantees that adult learners will become more literate or more competent at some occupation or another.

The adult educator's challenging role in helping to enhance some dimension, or other, of human competence in today's society calls for the kind of critical thought and analytical orientations associated with the philosophical approaches identified in this essay.

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